THE AGONIZING FREEDOM OF DECISION PALM SUNDAY APRIL 3, 1966
MATTHEW 21: 1-17

How free are you? To what degree do you possess the ability to determine your own destiny? It is a question that has been long debated by philosophers and theologians. It is a question that is relevant in our day - ~~in our situation~~ - especially on this day as we remember the events of Palm Sunday. The day Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem was a day of decision for him and for the city. As we observe the events of that day, we too feel ourselves caught up in its drama: we too feel that there is something about it all that assaults our usual apathy and demands that we too make a decision.

But how free are we? In what sense is man a free agent in a neutral environment, capable of picking and chosing for himself? There are several answers to that question. One of the most popular is that provided by determinism. This approach would say that there is no such thing as freedom of will: that man's destiny, man's every decision is predetermined by fate, or nature - or God - or what have you. Another answer is provided by the discipline of psychology which points out that we are subject to all sorts of subconscious drives and motivations: that freedom is an illusion because in reality we are enslaved by powers within us we don't even realize exist. In the context of man's relationship with God, the rigid Calvinists have traditionally maintained that man's eternal destiny is a mater of God's deciding alone: that even the elect and damned are pretermined apart from any freedom of choise on man's part.

Undoubtedly there is some truth in all of these: freddom is a relative word: freedom of will is a relative concept. Noone who knows much about the nature of man would hold that it exists absolutely. And yet in this matter of religion the burden of choice does seem to rest on individual men. : Man does seem to have the ability to decide.
Jesus Christ coerced no one. He called men to follow him, and in either accepting or rejecting the invitation they seemed to be exercising complete freedom. In the words of the European Theologian, Nicholas Beryaev,

"Man is free to go to hell if he so choses". In fact, one way of looking at it is that what distinguishes man from the rest of the created order is this terrible, yet relative, gift of freedom. Man alone has the ability to think beyond the immediate situation, to plan and to make decisions which will affect the future intentionally. IN short, I would suggest that freedom of will, given its limitations and relativity, does exist: that you and I have the painful privilege of freedom of decision, and that we are exercising that freedom all the time.

and yet to say this, and this alone would be extremely naive, for obviously the human animal is hesitant to intentionally exercise this freedom. We are hesitant to make decisions: we would much rather allow things to take their course: to avoid the basic risk of decision making in every area of human endeavor. IN the world of business the top is occupied by those very rare men who are comfortable making decisions; and all the positions beneath are occupied by the millions of others who are more comfortable doing what someone else tells them to do. The entire justification for the field of advertising , is in one sense, the realistic position that people can be told what to do: that the average consumer can be coerced into a favorable decision about a product, given the proper amount and quality of canned motivation .

The general trend of our civilization is away from decision making and toward the relative saftey of uninvolvement. We were shocked several years ago when a young woman was murdered on the steps to her New York Apartment. - while thirty two people watched from their windows. We were shocked still more by the response-we didn't want to get involved" When they were questioned be the police. And suddenly we discovered that as a nation we were suffering a serious illness. The murder on the apartment house stairs was not an isolated incident - but an illustrative incident - of others that happen every day - in the subways streets and allleys of all our major cities. People simply don't want to get involved.

A few weeks ago the Gemini 8 Space craft encountered serious diffuculty while performing a mission so fantastic that our minds are stretched by the thought of it. The television net works assumed that the flight was an item of concern in the minds of the American public - and so interupted regular programming to bring minute by minute coverage of the mission;s termination. But for many people the assumption was wrong. Phone calls from irate viewers flooded the stations, and the content of the pathetic compliants was the same: " WE don't care about this business: nor about the welfare of the astraunats: we don't want to be involved. We'd much rather be lulled and tranqulilized by programming, which - in the words of its producers - is aimed at the mentality of an eight year old.

People react much the same toward the Church of Jesus Christ today. It is generally granted the the church is a goodthing: but for an increasing percentage of our people - not a thing one wants to get involved in: not a matter one wants to make decisions about.

Man is hesitant to be decisive; man , as he is in the mid twentieth century, prefers the safe cocoon of uninvolvement. Time and time again, in matters as wide ranging as politics,&religion and local safety regulations people give eloquent testimony that the freedom to decide is not one that is exercised comfortably or regularly.

On this day, however, we celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ into the city of Jerusalem. I have sid that it was a day of decision, and I would suggest that a careful look at what transpired will provide us with further food for thought regarding our own freedom of decision.

It certainly was a day of decsion for Jesus. New Testament scholars agree that his decision to go - his turning his "Face steadfastly toward Jerusalem" was the pivotal point in his life. He had spent his life time in the rural area: his ministry had centered in Galalea - among fishing people. But Jesus was a Jew and a man. For him, Jersalem was the Holy City - the City of David - the locale of the Temple with its legacy

of history and tradition. For the Jew and the man life would not be complete without celebrating the passover in the city. But even more that it was to Jerusalem that Jesus would finally have to bring his ministry. The city would have to be the final arbiter of his life. We can assume that had Jesus not come: had he stayed in Galilea, had he heeded the wrnings of his disciples - he would not have been crucified - but he came - he made the agonizing decision.

The Gospels accounts of the day are full of tragic irony - an irony completely missed by the popular pictures of the event which show shiny faced children laying well pressed and clean robes in his path. It was a motely crew. Those who came out to meet him were the ones who knew him from Galilea: the poor and dirty fishermen: the sinners: the social outcasts. The spectacle they created must have raised eyebrows among those who really mattered in the city. To the chief priests and scribes the event had a note of threatening danger about it. After all, all these people were in the city in the first place to celebrate their ancestors liberation from Egypt,. Nationalist feeling always ran high at the Passover - coupled with an increased resentment toward the Roman authorities. It was an explosive situation inherently with all the makings or riot and revolution - neither one of which the relgioous establishment could well afford. And now, right into the midst of it all, came Jesus of Nazareth, with a rag tag following that apparently thought he was some kind of King.

There were a lot of forces palying against each other that day. each involving dangerous potential,. Certainly it would have been bettter had he stayed awasy. And then there was the way he came and what he did when he arrived. He had gone out of his way to procurr an ass on which to ride - and the people couldn't help but remeber the prophecy of Zecharia "Behold your King comes to you, humble and lowly is he; riding on an ass, and on a colt the foal of an ass." As if this preposterous

deminstration wasn't enough he went right to the temple, and there drove out the merchants and money changers. Again the people couldn' t help recalling the prophecy of Malachi: "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his Temple: the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of Hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears. "

We know our Lord Jesus Christ - not only as the incarnate son of God but also as a man: a man like us, with all our fears and insecurities. On this day he made the most important decision of his life - and his decicion must always stand in judgement upon our own indecisiveness.

But it was also a day of decision for Jerusalem. The city was full of people like you and me: people with free will: people free to chose for or against, but people who would rather not have exercised that freedom. It is naive to assume that the population of Jerusalem was agaisnt him and wanted him crucified: ~~it is naive to assume, for that mateer, that he was even known widely within the city~~ On the contrary. Jerusalem was fulll of respectable, neutral pepple who didn't want to get invloved: people who couldn't have cared less. They had nothing agaist Jesus of Nazareth - and yet history has judged them. In a very real sense they were guilty of his death": it was their neutrality - as mush as anything else - that was resonsible foir what happened.

In other words, freedom for the Jerusalemites was defined by the fact that Jesus Christ came into their midst. They were free to chose for or against him. They were not free to remain neutral - for their neutrality added up to the same thing as strenuous opposition.

That is the lesson about free will thta Palm Sunday teaches us. On the big issues we are free to decide - but never free to remain neutral. It is only in the polite cirles of diplomacy that neutrality among nations is taken seriously - for there is no such thing as neutrality in the confrontation of Communism and Democracy. A decision must be and is alwasy made.

In the very practical matter of local politics there is no such thingas neutrality - for abstaining from voting O- uninvolvement- is the very same thing as a vote cast for the party that has a two to one plurality. In personal confrontation neutrality is equally as impossible. To ignore a man in need is to be an accomliss in his predicament - a fact which is now law in several states. It is, above all else, impossible for the instiution that bears the name of Jesus Christ to be neutral about anything. especially those problems of the culture in which we live. The church that turns its head from racial injustice, from poverty, from questions of morality, is simply throwing its considerable weight behind the status quo whether it wants to or not. George Arthur Buttrick, commenting on Jesus driving the money changers from the temple said: "He was mad angry. So, true Christianity will become angry. True Christianity is known by its indignations as well as by its gentleness, by its foes as well as by its friends."

It's a hard lesson for us to learn - because by nature we want our religion to be comfortable. We don't like it when someone rocks the boat. We would rather avoid the touchy issue, the controversial subject - the heated matter which might turn public opinion against us. But on Palm Sunday we ought to see that this is anegation and denial of everything our Lord did, and especially his decisiveness in confronting Jerusalem.

Finally, Palm Sunday ought to make it abundantly clear that Jesus Christ demand a decision of all men. From the beginning he was an intruder and an upsetter of the staus quo. From the inn keeper who refused him entrance, on down, the men who confronted him found themselves forced into a decision. It was never easy. He, himself said; "He who is not for me is agaisnt me."

As he intruded into history, as he intruded into the passive neutrality of Jerusalem on the first day of the week of the Passover - so he intrudes

into your life and mine - demanding that we make a decision - forcing our hand to exercise the agaonizing freedom of will.

As he claimed the Holy City as his own - so he claims to be the Sovereign Lord of all life - a claim that elliminates all neutrality. Those who wanted him executed were a small minosity. But their blood curdling scream "Crucify him!" was echoed and magnified by the deep uninvolved silence of the city. That cry is magnified today when his demand is unanswered - when no decision is made.

How will we decide? Will we decide? Or will our uninvolvement, our passive neutrality about Jesus Christ become a silent but powerful blow against him?

This is the question raised and lesson taught by Palm Sunday - the agonizing freedom of decision.

AMEN

Get kids to bring OGH boxes forward
Fill baptismal bowl
see Ard about kitchen
tell her about elec. inspector

Almighty and Eternal God, thou who art the sovereign lord of the universe - and yet who dost care for ~~man~~ every man, we come before thee in praise and adoration. As the voices of old were lifted in Hosannas ~~to thy son Jesus Christ~~ - so we would praise thee this day - through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hear us now our father as we, each one, give thee thanks for all thou and - and for all thou hast done for us. Let us pray silently.

Hear our prayers of gratitude, our father, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray for others - ~~for~~ # (let us pray silently) for those less fortunate than we -

O thou who art merciful + kind - teach us to love all men as thou hast loved us. Teach us to deal with each other in tolerance + gentleness - in understanding + forgiveness. Through J.C -

Let us pray for faith - for the courage to live decisively for what we believe - Let us pray silently -

Our father, we confess that we have often cried Hosanna with ~~no~~ part of our being - and denied thee with another. We confess our involvement in the same sin which crucified our Lord. We ask thy help. We pray for the strength + power of thy Holy Spirit - that we might be faithful disciples - through Jesus Christ our Lord - who would have us pray saying -